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The State, Economics and Sport

PIERRE BOURDIEU

(Translated by Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare)

Talking about sport scientifically is difficult because in one sense it is too easy: everyone has their own ideas on the subject, and feels able to say something intelligent about it. Even Durkheim would already remark that the main difficulty in doing sociology was caused by the fact that everyone feels they have an innate understanding of it. Social objects are hidden behind a screen of preconstructed discourses which present the worst barrier to scientific investigation, and countless sociologists believe they are talking about the object of study when they are merely relaying the discourse which, in sport as elsewhere, the object produces about itself, whether through its officials, supporters or journalists. Consequently the construction of truly scientific objects implies a break with common representations (what Durkheim termed *prenotions*) which can notably be effected by *taking these prenotions as the object of study*.

It is therefore necessary to break with preconstructions, but without however avoiding the problems (notably political ones) that preconstructed discourses can involve through a slipping into what I shall call the *escapism of Wertfreiheit* (value-free-ness); or in other words, through systematically taking refuge in that kind of political indifferentism which is value-free-ness. I myself have indulged in this *escapism*. It has to be said that, in the world of research, there is a lot of social profit to be gained by giving (and by claiming) the appearance of neutrality (which is taken for objectivity). Although I have always undertaken research on burning issues, the more 'controversial' the subject the more I have tended to remain aloof and to invest more (in terms of time especially) in the task of objectivation. But this *escapism* also very often allows one to obtain great benefits very cheaply. For example, one can undertake descriptive microsociology in giving accounts of a peaceful and unproblematic little rural sports club, or of inner city children playing street basketball;¹ or conversely, huge surveys can be produced on objects involving no major theoretical or empirical issues, such as for instance the social make-up of sports crowds, vaguely linking it to the problem of violence through a discussion of the relationship between violence and the spectators' social origins. The same is true of a certain use of history: research intended to glorify people or institutions is

more easily accepted than historical sociology, which can be particularly corrosive, or even explosive and difficult to bear, when it studies the tools of thought of researchers or the research community itself.

This brings me to the problem that I should like to raise here, that of the relations between the State, economics and sport. This is a huge problem that the literature critical of collusion between sport, politics and money treats in its own not very scientific way, thereby running the risk of provoking a reaction of *Wertfreiheit escapism* and turning researchers away from the important issues that the same literature identifies, for example drug taking, business approaches in sport, the economic and political impact of commercialising football as a product, etc. These difficult problems must be treated seriously, but in order to be able to resolve them scientifically, the task of constructing the object of study requires great care. I shall therefore try to produce in draft form a programme of research, in other words a coherent system of questions susceptible of a scientific treatment.

Sport and Economics

When one considers the recent development of sport and more particularly that of football, a trend towards commercialisation becomes evident. This trend affects the whole of the space of sporting activities, but differentiates itself in each sport according to each sport's own internal logic and especially, according to the specific logic in each case of the relationship between the sport's practitioners and television, which is the veritable Trojan Horse for the entry of commercial logic into sport. This process is hidden by discussion of little North African or Senegalese children playing football with tin cans or rag balls (underprivileged classes of underdeveloped countries often serve as football nurseries where promoters of commercialised football can find players to make their teams competitive), or, closer to home, by discussion of small amateur clubs whose always fragile survival depends of the unfailing self-sacrifice of unpaid volunteers. The major determining principle of all these changes is that alongside football as *practice*, and alongside sport undertaken by amateurs, particularly in small-town clubs where people can play amateur sport until they are quite old, has arisen football as *spectacle*. This latter is produced in order to be commercialised in the form of *televised spectacle*, a *commercial product* which is especially profitable because football is very widely practised and therefore engenders very extensive interest, and because it requires relatively little interpretative capital: people believe that because they have kicked a ball around they know all they need to understand and discuss a football match, which is not the case for every sport. Some sports make many more demands in terms of interpretation: the

uninitiated understand nothing and, most importantly, realise they understand nothing. Clubs are increasingly becoming capitalist businesses, some quoted on the Stock Exchange and producing licit and illicit profits. All this is well known, but what are less well known are all the consequences that derive from it.

Amongst other factors involved in this commercialisation must be mentioned the extension to sport of the rules of neo-liberal economics, as symbolised by the notorious *Bosman* ruling, which will never be discussed in an academic conference although a paper on its social implications ought to be essential. Indeed this measure is very similar to others affecting other practices, such as for example the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment, against which French creative artists and performers have protested. The explicit objective of this ruling, according to its supporters, is to extend the workings of the free market and to put an end to what might, by analogy, be called *French (sporting) exceptionalism* by preventing town halls from continuing to subsidise football clubs. This free market logic is encouraged to differing extents by the sports policies of different countries.

But to return to the other important factor, television, I have shown in an article on the Olympic Games that through the intervention of television this ritual celebration of universal values has become a medium for nationalism.² Starting from an apparently universal spectacle (although there is a lot of nationalism on show in stadiums themselves: the opening parade by national teams, national flags, national anthems, etc.), each different national television channel makes a selection of what it shows according to its own commercial logic, thereby creating its own national and potentially nationalistic spectacle of the Olympic Games, which no one sees in their totality. This contributes to turning sport into an issue of importance for nation-states, with a host of much studied consequences, such as the appearance of authoritarian training methods and, especially, of performance-enhancing drug taking. I am thinking here, for example, of the book by the American author John Hoberman, *Mortal Engines*, which demonstrates that drug taking does not happen merely incidentally, but is a structural feature of sport as it is today.³

Sport visible as spectacle hides the reality of a system of actors competing over commercial stakes. There is an obvious analogy with the artistic field, where the artist is merely the visible agent without whom there would obviously be no work of art, and where the work of art only exists as such by virtue of the activities of critics and of other artists in competition and so on, in other words all that I term the artistic field. Sport as spectacle, in the form that we know it as televised sporting spectacle, presupposes a system of competition in which, alongside sporting actors transformed into objects of spectacle, there are other actors. These are sports industry

managers who control television and sponsoring rights, the managers of television channels competing for national broadcasting rights (or rights covering linguistic areas), the bosses of major industrial companies such as Adidas or Coca-Cola competing with each other for exclusive rights to link their products with the sports event, and finally television producers.

This conversion of sport into commercial spectacle and into an advertising medium is also visible within football. The soccer World Cup is also a world cup for the media and for consortia locked in headlong competition. Among the social effects of this 'mediatisation' of football are to be found: the increase in the number of matches (with the growth of European and international competitions); the increase in the number of matches televised; the trend for pay-TV channels to obtain exclusive rights for matches; the fact that the time and date of matches are more and more determined by the needs of television; changes to the structure of competitions; corruption scandals; the birth of globe-trotting cosmopolitan players, often coming from economically dependent countries and changing clubs every two or three years – the effect of which is to transform the relationship between supporters and players.

As an aside, I should mention that, since the media field is not completely heteronomous, the logic of seeking competitive advantage through differentiation (shared by all fields) has brought about (as shown by Françoise Papa) stylistic innovation in television production and commentary – a form of art for art's sake (initiated in particular by Canal Plus)⁴ – this is to say things done by TV producers to compete with their rivals, and which may pass unnoticed by the general public.

Sport and the State

This process of 'commercialisation' is resisted to differing degrees in different countries, according to the strength of their statist traditions, as shown by the comparative analysis of England and France (in a conference paper by Dauncey and Hare).⁵ In England, this process started very early: clubs very quickly became limited companies quoted on the Stock Exchange and, once engaged with the logic of capitalist profit-making, they broke their solidarity with second, third and fourth division clubs and set up an independent league. They have kept their secondary income, built new stadiums away from working-class districts, developed full commercial sponsorship, and bought foreign players, especially from African countries, which has meant that the cosmopolitanism of the players has conflicted with the local values of the club's fans. The major consequence of all this is a break in the chain of player development in which a player used to be able to begin in a village club and finish in the national team. There was a kind

of career path offering the possibility of upward mobility for children of those social classes who had little opportunity of succeeding in the only career path valued today, which is education. Between grass-roots sport and sport as spectacle, between small amateur sports clubs and big professional teams there were links that were very important from the perspective of the very function of sport and of the relations between sport as practice and sport as spectacle. These links were very important also from the perspective of democratic values.

In the eyes of economic neo-liberals, French football professionalism has developed 'late' and in an 'incomplete' way, leaving an important role to unpaid volunteers (for neo-liberalism everything that is not neo-liberal is 'archaic', 'out-dated' and 'old-fashioned' – something like an amalgam of the French National Front and Communist Party). Although in the 1980s the logic of business was getting in thanks to television (bidding up of broadcasting rights etc.), France remained wedded – in the field of sport as elsewhere – to the ideology of the 'public service', and the 'commercialisation' process met with resistance from the amateur structures of sport (despite the economic difficulties they were experiencing because of dwindling crowds and reduced public subsidies and so on). France has a considerable educational infrastructure and links between the school system and sport, since sport has always had an eminently educational function (for example, elite sportsmen and women visit schools to warn against drug taking). The link between clubs and a large-scale volunteer-based sports development infrastructure has not (yet) been broken, explaining why French clubs have become a breeding ground serving other clubs throughout Europe. Unpaid voluntary work and amateurism are continuing both in the running of clubs and in the ranks of players, and football is still fulfilling its function of civic integration, especially for children of immigrants. Unfortunately, the neo-liberal rot has already infected the fruit of 'public service' and many of football's current problems (although this does not just affect football – think of the HIV-infected blood transfusion affair or the Crédit Lyonnais deficit) derive from the fact that many people are playing at running a private enterprise for purposes of speculation, high profits and salaries, while retaining the protection offered by being in the public service.

Scientific Utopia

The more their analysis is scientifically well-founded, the more sociologists have the right (the duty?) to be normative, in contrast to what is encouraged by *Wertfreiheit escapism*. In other words, one may be normative, but only after paying one's scientific dues. The programme of research which is sketched here should allow scientific answers to normative questions such

as asking whether French exceptionalism – that is to say the very special relationship between sport and the State which makes sport a public service, public health service or civic education service – is merely an out-of-date idiosyncrasy doomed to be swept away by the forces of money.

If I feel myself entitled to ask this question without being accused of complacent nostalgia for a national model, it is because a few years ago I wrote a paper entitled ‘Two Imperialisms of the Universal’, in which I demonstrated that two countries have sought – and are still seeking – to impose their own particular conception of universality on the world, namely France and the United States, and that it is therefore quite natural for these two would-be universal cultural models to be in conflict with each other in almost every domain, and especially in the cultural domain.⁶ It is only by rejecting the imperialism of the universal implied in any ambition to universalise a given model that this French vision can be defended – a vision that I can all the more confidently defend as it is nowadays under serious threat and thereby holds little threat itself.

This model, which follows in the tradition of the Enlightenment, attempts to defend a number of choices making up a systematic whole: the choice of ‘solidarity’ or ‘solidarism’ over ‘individuality’ or ‘individualism’; the choice of ‘social security’ against ‘individual private insurance’; the choice of the ‘collective’ over the ‘individual’. However, those neo-liberals who attack the French model do so in the name of a very specific view of the State, which they describe as totalitarian, collectivist, destructive of individuality and liberty, the incarnation *par excellence* of this model of the State in their view being the Soviet Union. In opposition to this Marxist vision that paradoxically they take as their own, one should here set out a defence of the Hegelian or Durkheimian vision according to which the State, far from being reducible solely to a class-based State, is also society’s self-awareness; it is society which ‘thinks itself’ and goes beyond its conflicts to find in the universal a compromise between opposing interests, in other words in public service, the general interest, education, disinterested amateurism and large-scale independent non-profit-making educational organisations. One peculiarity of the Hegelian State – of which the State of the French Third Republic was nearly an exact incarnation – is that it feels a responsibility for *bodies* through provision of social security and health policy (especially in terms of protection against drug addiction), through consumer protection and sports policy. From this perspective, it is understandable why drugs represent a key issue and pose specific problems in France: French people find it particularly intolerable that it is through sporting activity – which is supposed to fight against addiction – that a new form of drug abuse has emerged in the form of performance-enhancement.

The economic and symbolic forces which today threaten sport as a

disinterested practice – notably the forces of great global ceremonies like the World Cup – can be combated either by caricature (which can ridicule or discredit) or utopia (which can propose alternatives to what exists). But not just any utopia. A scientifically-based and realistic utopia, proposing a coherent and universalist model and with a reasonable chance of being implemented, should advocate for example: emphasis on the educational value of sport; the strengthening of the State's moral and legal support for the ideas and interests of the national sports federations' un-paid officials; stronger measures against corruption; encouragement of coaching centres for young players; more emphasis on the development of young players as opposed to reliance on the transfer market; restoring continuity between grass-roots clubs and elite sportsmen and women; promotion of young people's realistic identification with famous players facilitated by a real model of advancement, and for children of immigrants the promotion of social integration through sport. A body of law specifically applying to sport should be developed, along with a Sports Charter, governing not only sportsmen and women (like the Olympic oath), but also commentators, heads of television channels, etc. The aim of all this would be to restore, in the world of sport, those values which the world of sport proclaims and which are very like the values of art and science (non-commercial, ends in themselves, disinterested, valuing fair play and the 'way the game is played' as opposed to sacrificing everything for results). In this utopia journalists would hold an eminent position, notably sports journalists, who, being dominated within the field of journalism, and consequently sometimes more lucid and more critical than others, could play the role of critical conscience for the sporting world.

NOTES

This is a shortened English version – translated by Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare – of the keynote presentation made at the CNRS Conference 'Football et cultures' held in Paris, 13–16 May 1998. A full French version of this paper is to be included in a special forthcoming number of the journal *Sociétés et Représentations*, which is devoted to the proceedings of the Conference.

1. The French term 'banlieue', which literally means 'suburb', is here translated as 'inner-city' in order to communicate the French connotations of social deprivation and underprivilege, and social and racial tension.
2. P. Bourdieu, 'Les jeux olympiques', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 103, June 1994, 102–3.
3. J. Hoberman, *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (New York, Maxwell-Macmillan, 1992).
4. F. Papa, 'Logique médiatique et stratégie des chaînes', *Sociétés et Représentations* (forthcoming).
5. H. Dauncey and G. Hare, 'Télévision et commercialisation du football', *Sociétés et Représentations* (forthcoming).
6. P. Bourdieu, 'Deux impérialismes de l'universel', in C. Fauré and T. Bishop (eds.), *L'Amérique des Français* (Paris, Seuil, 1992), 149–55.